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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN - SHYMKENT IS YOUNG, MUSLIM, AND GROWING FAST

REF: 07 Tashkent 877

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SUMMARY  
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1. (SBU) South Kazakhstan oblast and its capital, Shymkent, are experiencing rapid population growth due to high birth rates, an influx of ethnic Kazakhs from abroad, and labor migration from Uzbekistan. While local officials claim local media is largely independent, civil society representatives contend that the media remains government-dominated and that journalists are afraid to criticize the authorities. Civil society in South Kazakhstan has matured in recent years, and the government is increasing its cooperation with NGOs. According to both officials and civil society activists, the threat from Islamic religious extremists such as Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) is real in South Kazakhstan, fueled by poverty and ignorance. Local authorities are also concerned about the activities of non-traditional evangelical groups. Leaders of these groups allege government harassment and persecution. End Summary.

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YOUNG, MUSLIM, AND GROWING FAST  
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2. (SBU) During March 4-7, poloff and pol FSN visited Shymkent, the capital of South Kazakhstan oblast, for a series of meetings with local government officials, NGOs, and religious leaders. The population of South Kazakhstan and Shymkent itself is young, rapidly growing, and dominated by ethnic Kazakhs and Uzbeks. Bahadyr Narymbetov, director of South Kazakhstan's Department of Internal Policy, told us that the oblast's population is approximately 2.5 million, including 600,000 ethnic Uzbeks. Shymkent's official population is 800,000, though Narymbetov contends the city's actual population exceeds one million due to a significant number of unregistered residents. The absence of a significant ethnic Russian population is apparent from walking the streets of Shymkent. Rezeda Gluschenko, director of the South Kazakhstan office of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights, reported continued out-migration of ethnic Russians from the region.

3. (SBU) Narymbetov said South Kazakhstan's population is growing rapidly, principally due to a high birth rate among ethnic Kazakhs and an influx of oralman (ethnic Kazakh immigrants from other countries). Kazakh families in South Kazakhstan average three to four children. As a result, the population is very young, with 32% of residents 14 to 29 years old. Narymbetov said youth unemployment is high, and even university graduates face problems, with 40% of

them unemployed or working in areas outside the scope of their education. Under the national government's oralman quota program, oralman families are assigned to live in different regions of the country, though many ultimately move to South Kazakhstan because it is the region closest in location, climate, and mindset to Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Tajikistan, the most common countries of oralman origin. Narymbetov said the oralman population brings a unique set of challenges. Many come from countries using non-Cyrillic alphabets and thus cannot read Kazakh. Narymbetov criticized the lengthy process for obtaining proper documentation and citizenship and the difficulty involved in getting foreign university diplomas certified in Kazakhstan, both of which contribute to oralman unemployment.

14. (SBU) Narymbetov also cited labor migration, primarily from Uzbekistan, as a source of population growth. Though he did not cite specific numbers, he said there is a constant flow of labor migrants from Uzbekistan attracted by higher salaries and better opportunities, and most of them are working illegally in Kazakhstan.

Laura Kalmenova, chairperson of the Bereke Public Association, oversees two migrant labor support centers near the border, and confirmed that illegal migration from Uzbekistan is increasing. She estimates that approximately 70% of these migrants become victims of exploitation, with employers refusing to pay what was promised. She also told us that labor migrants frequently live in terrible conditions with poor sanitation. (reftel)

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"THERE'S NOT MUCH OPPOSITION TO THE GOVERNMENT HERE"  
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15. (SBU) Narymbetov claimed that 10 political parties have their branch offices in the region, but only Nur Otan is active. (Note: Narymbetov's government office is located in the Nur Otan party headquarters, a prominent building with a large Nur Otan sign running the length of the building's facade. He told us the Department of Internal Policy and several businesses rent office

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space from Nur Otan. End Note.) Narymbetov described the political situation as calm, contending that "there's not much opposition to the government here." Regarding other parties, he maintained that Aul has some support in rural areas and Ak Zhol used to enjoy significant support in the south, but people became disenchanted after the party's split. He claimed that Zharmakhan Tuyakbay's National Social Democratic Party (OSDP) receives about 15-20% voter support in the districts near his birthplace. (Note: Nur Otan officially received 88.09% of the vote in the oblast during the August 2007 parliamentary elections. OSDP received 5.25%, followed by Ak Zhol with 3.98%. End Note.)

16. (SBU) Narymbetov claimed 90% of the media outlets in South Kazakhstan oblast are independent, but acknowledged that the most popular newspaper, radio, and television outlets are government controlled. He said that the akimat (i.e., oblast administration) frequently places government orders with the media on various topics, contending that everyone wins from this process: the media receives additional income, the government gets its message out to the public, and the people get information. Nevertheless, he said that the akimat restricts government orders to 10-15% of the total media content. Rayhan Khobdabergenova, director of the South Kazakhstan Association of Lawyers and a civil society activist, questioned the independence of local media, arguing that television stations in particular were not independent at all. She said privately-owned newspapers will occasionally publish articles critical of the local government, but that local journalists in general were afraid to criticize the authorities.

17. (SBU) Gluschenko, director of the local Human Rights Bureau chapter, said the media is afraid to report about the rampant corruption in local government and law enforcement. As a specific example, she said the Bureau organized a press conference to publicize procedural violations during a recent trial of a group of alleged terrorists (see below), but not a single journalist showed up. She claimed law enforcement agencies routinely abuse detainees, as the police have no other method of making suspects talk. She

also said government jobs are frequently "sold", and when a new administrator is appointed, bureaucrats must pay another bribe to keep their posts. She added that judges speak openly about taking bribes in exchange for particular rulings.

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CIVIL SOCIETY IS SLOWLY MATURING  
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¶18. (SBU) Several NGOs reported that civil society in South Kazakhstan has matured significantly over the last several years, though it remains weak in many spheres and in rural areas. Laura Kalmenova, chairperson of the Bereke Public Association, told us that the capacity and professionalism of NGOs has improved, and that local government authorities have become more cooperative with them. Among other projects, Bereke runs resource centers for women in rural areas, migrant labor support centers, and provides adaptation assistance for oralman. Kalmenova is a member of the akim's NGO council, and Bereke has been successful in receiving some government contracts. She said that village leaders in some rural areas are still ignorant and suspicious of NGOs, though several are very supportive of Bereke's migrant labor support centers.

¶19. (SBU) Gluschenko from the Human Rights Bureau said that the akimat treats her NGO with respect because they have developed expertise in a few niche areas, such as monitoring prison conditions. Gluschenko is a member of the oblast penitentiary oversight committee and provides training to prison officials. She said local officials have called her in the past to help quell prison riots and disturbances. Hobdabergenova, director of the South Kazakhstan Association of Lawyers, maintained that government cooperation with NGOs is getting better, but often depends on the personalities involved, and in general the government has no great desire to work with NGOs.

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FERTILE GROUND FOR RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM?  
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¶10. (SBU) Bakhytzhan Yesenov, director of the South Kazakhstan Oblast Ministry of Justice, reported that there are 834 registered religious groups in the oblast, representing 17 different faiths. Reflecting the heavy concentration of ethnic Kazakhs and Uzbeks, 735 of these groups are Islamic, 18 are Orthodox Christian, one is Catholic, and the remaining 33 are various Protestant and non-traditional groups, including a registered Jehovah's Witnesses affiliate.

¶11. (SBU) Virtually all of our interlocutors maintained that the

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threat from religious extremists such as Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) is real, though Gluschenko from the Human Rights Bureau criticized the closed nature of trials against alleged extremists, and said the government is "overdoing" things in going after some of these groups. Narymbetov from the Department of Internal Policy and Yesenov from the Ministry of Justice both pointed to recent arrests and trials of HT members and Salafists as evidence of a genuine extremist threat. (Note: On March 3, 15 alleged members of a purported Salafi jihadist wing were convicted in Shymkent of setting up and running a terrorist organization and promoting terrorism. They received prison sentences ranging from 11 to 19 years. End Note.) Narymbetov cited South Kazakhstan's proximity to strongly religious Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan as one of the reasons for the extremism trend in the area, and maintained that citizens were vulnerable to extremist ideas because of their religious ignorance after 70 years of communist rule.

¶12. (SBU) Ruslan Abdullin, director of the Center for Tolerance and a prominent activist on religious and ethnic tolerance issues in Shymkent, agreed that religious extremism is a dangerous problem in the region, fueled by poverty and ignorance. (Note: Abdullin's Center for Tolerance receives grant support from the Embassy. End Note.) He also said that the outward appearance of piety and tradition on the part of HT appeals to local Muslims hungry for authenticity. Abdullin told us that there are several villages in

South Kazakhstan where HT is very strong, and that there are three or four mosques in Shymkent that have a Wahhabi undercurrent. The mosques are controlled by the Spiritual Association of Muslims of Kazakhstan, the quasi-official body that governs the practice of Islam in Kazakhstan. The Association occasionally replaces some of the more radical imams, though in Abdullin's view this has not effectively eliminated the problem.

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A BROAD DEFINITION OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM  
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¶13. (SBU) Both our government interlocutors and Abdullin extended their concerns about extremism to include non-traditional evangelical religious groups active in the region. Narymbetov claimed that a lot of "garbage" has penetrated the country due to Kazakhstan's liberal religion law, and these groups seek to impose their faith on others through books, visiting homes, and stopping people on the streets. Narymbetov, Yesenov, and Abdullin all put the Jehovah's Witnesses in the same category as HT, criticizing the group as a destabilizing influence on society that turns people against traditional social values and calls on them to disregard the state and reject military service. They did not name other groups, but criticized groups that proselytize or teach that they alone are correct, because these activities violate traditional values in Kazakhstan.

¶14. (SBU) In a separate meeting, pastors from three registered evangelical Christian churches criticized local officials for constant harassment and pressure. Zhetis Rayov, an ethnic Kazakh pastor of a New Life Church, told us that Ministry of Justice officials and procurators visit his church every few months and question him. They also occasionally question and intimidate church members. Rayov said that his church does not proselytize in the street or pass out literature. Nevertheless, he told us that on two occasions in the last year, Ministry of Justice officials explicitly told him to stop working with Kazakhs and Uzbeks and leave them alone. All three pastors reported that they have occasionally been forced to pay bribes to get inspectors and procurators to back off, and their churches have been the subject of negative newspaper and television stories in the last year describing them as sects that brainwash people. They credited the Association of Religious Organizations of Kazakhstan and Ninel Fokina of the Almaty Helsinki Committee for intervening and helping resolve their more serious disputes. The pastors also told us that they are aware of other Christian groups trying to register, but believe it is impossible for new non-traditional groups to obtain registration in the current climate. Rayov criticized the work of Abdullin and his Center for Tolerance, alleging that Abdullin refuses to work with evangelical Christians and only promotes tolerance among religions traditional to Kazakhstan.

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HOW TO FIGHT EXTREMISM?  
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¶15. (SBU) Both Narymbetov and Yesenov believe Kazakhstan's religion law needs to be strengthened in order to combat extremism. They criticized the existing law as weak and outdated. Yesenov told us that draft amendments are already under development in Astana, and that his office submitted a number of its own proposals. He said

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the oblast akim runs a council on religious affairs to coordinate the work of various government agencies in the religion sphere and issue reports and recommendations. He also told us that the Spiritual Association of Muslims of Kazakhstan regularly meets with imams and tests them. In his view, the low level of education among local imams is a problem, and there is no school offering higher religious education in the oblast.

¶16. (SBU) Abdullin criticized government efforts to combat religious extremism, describing them as outdated, ineffective, and primarily limited to reports and roundtables that do nothing to change behavior or popular opinion. He urged a more active and practical approach, and touted his model of involving people from different

faiths in joint sports competitions, charity projects, environmental work, tolerance marches, etc. He also showed us a pilot tolerance room at a local public school, filled with educational materials on various religions and videos depicting the horrific aftermath of the September 11 and Beslan terrorist attacks. Several students who regularly participate in the tolerance club performed a skit in which they demonstrated a street encounter with representatives of a sect, and taught the audience to reject their advances. Abdullin is actively seeking international financial support to create additional tolerance rooms in other public schools, and to add a multi-ethnic tolerance element to his program. He was pessimistic about receiving financial support from the government, which in his view is not open to new ideas on how to combat extremism.

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COMMENT  
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¶17. (SBU) Kazakhstanis frequently describe Shymkent and South Kazakhstan Oblast as the cultural heart of Kazakhstan. The greater "Central Asian" feel of the region is immediately apparent in the faces, language, tradition, and hospitality of the people, and in many respects the region foreshadows the emerging Kazakh cultural identity that the government seeks to create and promote nationally. On the other hand, Shymkent is a potential starting point for instability in Kazakhstan, particularly if the country were to experience significant economic problems. Under the right conditions, a rapidly growing population of young, unemployed Kazakhs and Uzbeks, combined with a relatively weak civil society and an unaccountable, corrupt local government could provide the ingredients for increased religious extremism and ethnic conflict. Local authorities are well aware of the threat, but offer little in response beyond their default desire for tighter government control.  
End Comment.

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